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WRITING LABORATORIES--A NEW APPROACH TO TEACHING COMPOSITION.

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AT THE ECONOMICS INSTITUTE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO, A SUMMER ORIENTATION PROGRAM FOR FOREIGN GRADUATE STUDENTS IN ECONOMICS, AN APPROACH TO THE TEACHING OF COMPOSITION HAS BEEN DEVELOPED WHICH INVOLVES THE USE OF WRITING LABORATORIES BASED ON THE PRINCIPLES OF THE AURAL-ORAL LANGUAGE LABORATORY. THE BASIC PRINCIPLE OF THE LATTER IS THAT BY MEANS OF ELECTRONIC EQUIPMENT THE STUDENT HAS THE OPPORTUNITY OF EXTENDED SELF-CORRECTING PRACTICE OF MATERIALS INTRODUCED IN CLASS. THE IMMEDIATE VERIFICATION OF HIS RESPONSE IS BUILT INTO THE PROGRAM. THE WRITING LABORATORY AS USED BY THE AUTHOR CONSISTS OF A SMALL GROUP OF ABOUT SEVEN TO TEN STUDENTS WHO PRACTICE COMPOSITION UNDER THE SUPERVISION OF AN INSTRUCTOR. A TYPICAL SESSION LASTS FOR ABOUT ONE AND A HALF HOURS. THE INSTRUCTOR CIRCULATES AMONG THE STUDENTS, CORRECTING THEIR LEXICAL AND STRUCTURAL MISTAKES, SUGGESTING ADDITIONAL VOCABULARY, AND POINTING OUT STYLISTIC DEVICES WHICH WILL MAKE THE WRITING MORE EFFECTIVE. THE STUDENT KEEPS HIS CORRECTED ASSIGNMENT IN A FOLDER WHICH HE BRINGS EACH TIME, PERMITTING A CUMULATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE TYPES OF MISTAKES WHICH HE TENDS TO MAKE. SEVERAL BASIC LINGUISTIC AND PSYCHOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES MUST BE KEPT IN MIND IN PREPARING MATERIALS FOR THIS TYPE OF WRITING EXERCISE--(1) THE STUDENT MUST NOT BE ASKED TO PERFORM ON A SIGNIFICANTLY HIGHER LEVEL OF PROFICIENCY THAN HE IS PREPARED FOR. (2) WHILE THE STUDENT IS STILL ON LEVELS TWO AND THREE, EMPHASIS ON FORM (THE MANIPULATION OF THE STRUCTURES) SHOULD PRECEDE EMPHASIS ON THE CONTENT OF THE COMPOSITION. A SAMPLE DRILL PRACTICING PAST TENSE NARRATION IS PRESENTED. THIS PAPER WAS READ AT THE NATIONAL NAFSA MEETINGS IN HOUSTON, TEXAS, APRIL 1967, AND APPEARS IN THE "ARIZONA FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHERS' FORUM, VOLUME XV, NUMBER 3," PUBLISHED BY THE DEPARTMENT OF ROMANCE LANGUAGES OF THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA, TUCSON, ARIZONA 85721. (AMM)

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WRITING LABORATORIES: A NEW APPROACH TO TEACHING COMPOSITION

by

Karl C. Sandberg

(Dr. Sandberg is Associate Professor of French at the University of Arizona and Director of English Instruction, Economics Institute, University of Colorado. The following article was a paper read at the national NAFSA meetings in Houston, Texas, April, 1967.)

In view of a recent nation-wide trend, it appears that the teaching of English composition has fallen upon evil days. Indicative of this trend is the fact that a number of major institutions, among them the University of Colorado, have dropped Frenshman English as a required class. The reason for so doing has been given that studies conducted at the State University of Iowa

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indicate that control groups who did not take Freshman English performed just as well on standardized composition tests in the junior year as those who had taken Freshman English. The conclusion drawn by a number of people in the field is that composition cannot be taught.

As a language teacher, I maintain the contrary, that is, that composition can be taught, either in English or in a foreign language if (1) the student has something to say, (2) he sees how others have effectively said similar things, and (3) he is stimulated to write out his thoughts. Rather than abandon the attempt to teach composition, it would seem better advised to do what was done in the field of language teaching thirty years ago, i. e. to examine methods and to rethink approaches.

At the Economics Institute, a summer orientation program for foreign graduate students in economics, we have worked out an approach to the teaching of composition which attempts to provide the conditions mentioned above and which, with a few modifications may possibly be adapted to regular foreign language classrooms. It involves the use of writing laboratories based on the principles of the aural-oral language laboratory.

The basic principle of the latter is that by means of electronic equipment the student has the opportunity of extended self-correcting practice of materials introduced in class. The immediate verification of his response is built into the program.

The writing laboratory as we have used it consists of a small group of about 7-10 students who practice composition under the supervision of an instructor, who, reversing the trend, replaces the mechanical equipment.

It is conceivable that writing exercises of a highly controlled nature could be programmed for an electronic lab, but since the level of language learning toward which we must move rapidly is more complex than this, a more flexible instrument, that is an instructor is needed. Graduate students and teaching assistants have worked out very well in this kind of assignment.

A typical session lasts for about 1 1/2 hours. The drill, which I will describe later, is introduced, the students start to write, and the instructor circulates among them, correcting their lexical and structural mistakes, suggesting additional vocabulary, and pointing stylistic devices which will make the writing more effective. The student keeps his corrected assignment in a folder which he brings each time, permitting a cumulative analysis of the types of mistakes which he tends to make.

The advantages of this arrangement over the usual system are evident. The time lapse between production and verification is greatly lessened. The student has the benefit of asking questions about the markings on his paper, he has a readily-accessible informant by means of whom he can increase his vocabulary, and he has the opportunity of a guided analysis of his mistakes.

Of course, the effectiveness of the writing laboratory, like that of the aural-oral language laboratory, depends to a large degree upon the materials prepared for it.

In preparing materials for this type of writing exercise, several basic linguistic and psychological principles must be kept in mind.

The first is that the student must not be asked to perform on a significantly higher level of proficiency than he is prepared for (and this is what we do every time that we assign a beginning or intermediate student a general subject and tell him to write a theme).

Let us assume for the moment that the levels of language learning are (1) direct imitation (eg. memorization or dictation) (2) highly controlled manipulation which permits only one correct answer (e.g. substitution drills) (3) semi-controlled manipulation which permits several correct responses (e.g. question-answer, such as "What would you do if you were rich?") and free composition (e.g. "Describe your roommate.") The results of asking the student to perform on level four before he is proficient on levels two and three can only be frustration and error as he transfers structures and vocabulary from his own language and clutches at linguistic straws.

A second point is that while the student is still on levels two and three, emphasis on form (the manipulation of the structures) should precede emphasis on the content of the composition. This point is supported by the fact that the student has much more difficulty in learning the structures than vocabulary.

At the University of Arizona we have been testing the effectiveness of materials programmed in French for the teaching of reading. The results show that a student can usually recall the meaning of a lexical item after only three or four encounters and after a time lapse of three to four weeks.

Difficult structures, on the other hand, are still troublesome after even thirty encounters. Although the problems of teaching reading are not the same as those of teaching production of the language, it seems safe to assume that the relative difficulties of learning structure and vocabulary are somewhat the same.

In order to teach structures the most effectively, writing drills should be a reinforcing of previous oral work and should be constructed in such a manner that they will facilitate or necessitate the use of patterns previously introduced.

If the primary emphasis is on structure, the drill should also "prime the pump". It should provide the student with content (subject matter and vocabulary) which he can use for practice. If he does not have anything to say, he finds himself in the position of the Saudi Arabian student who wrote a one line composition on the subject of "Transportation in my country": "There is none."

But even though writing drills must be controlled for effective practice, the pitfall of boredom must be avoided. Otherwise the drills become just as unproductive as if they sinned against the most basic linguistic canons. And the possibility of boredom is inherent in most controlled drills, such as substitution and transformation exercises. In order to evoke and retain interest, writing drills must be open-ended, that is, they must allow for some exercise of the students choice and imagination. Russell N. Campbell of U.C.L.A., commenting on language lab programs, says: "We are overlooking one serious need: materials which are not dead-end or damaging to student morale. For example, there is no first-year course available today which presents language learning as being fun or interesting. We have made great advances, to be sure, but we

have not worked out a way to achieve these objectives except through types of exercises which are almost hypnotically repetitious and boring...."[1]

The following drill is one which we have used to give practice in past tense narration. It is intended for an intermediate level and presupposes previous introduction and oral drill on past tense and passive forms. Before the students start to write, the instructor reads the exercise aloud and takes care of any lexical difficulties the student might have.

> Instructions: Write a biographical sketch of the imaginary Russian novelist Ivan Ivanovich. You may describe him as you like, but the following questions and information may help you. Most of the action will, of course, be in the past tense.
>
> Parentage: Born 1812. Father dies when Ivan is three - How? from tuberculosis? by political assassination? of grief over his wife's infidelity? from being thrown from a horse? Mother - rich or poor? beautiful or homely? aristocratic or commoner? strong (domineering, self-willed) or weak? selfish or generous? like or unlike her husband?
>
> Ivan's Education: Was it solid or sketchy? Did he study classical or modern subjects? How many languages did he learn to read? to speak? French? German? Spanish? Chinese? Latin? How widely did he read in economics and political theory?
>
> His Siberian Experience: Arrested in 1842 for plotting on the Czar's life. Was he guilty or not guilty? How was he treated in Siberia? harshly or kindly? How did he stand the weather? Did he lose his mind or remain sane? Released in 1847.
>
> Declining Years in Paris: Writes his masterpiece Confessions of a Siberian Exile - acclaimed or rejected by Parisian society? Died rich or poor? from starvation, gout, or tuberculosis?

If the student possesses a large vocabulary he branches out from the possibilities suggested. If he does not, he still finds enough alternatives in the drill for him to do something imaginative and original (no two biographies of Ivan Ivanovich resembled each other).

This type of drill has been highly successful in creating interest, providing the opportunity for abundant and highly motivated practice. The same principles could be applied to less advanced groups if a higher degree of control and more vocabulary were introduced.

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1. "The Language Laboratory and Teaching Pronunciation", Workpapers on English as a Second Language: Matter, Methods, Materials, Dept. of English, U.C.L.A., 1967, p. 69.